



AN OPTIMISTIC VIEW OF HISTORY

Mortimer Adler

“The working of history is at once the result of man’s freedom and God’s providence . . .” An eminent philosopher surveys man’s terrestrial experience and envisions...

I should like in this paper not merely to express optimism but to give my reasons for it and, in doing so, I shall have to outline in brief what might be eulogistically described as a philosophy of history. First, let me reject certain contemporary definitions of optimism. Recently I have heard an optimist defined as a man who thinks the future is uncertain. I have also heard an optimist defined as a man who thinks things cannot get worse. I suppose in some sense both these definitions describe aspects of optimism, for no one would be an optimist if the future were not uncertain nor if things could get progressively worse. I am sure you will find me an optimist before I am finished but I am not sure you will think what I have to say about the philosophy of history is quite respectable. If you don’t think so, I can only plead that I don’t think the subject is respectable itself.

Vincent McNabb recently said that the philosophy of history is the best part of history and the history of philosophy is the worst part of philosophy. I should like to turn that around and say that in the history of philosophy you have history at its best, but in the philosophy of history you have philosophy at its worst. But however inadequate a philosophy of history must be because of the nature of its subject matter, it does try to deal with important matters and it is important, especially in times like these, when men have such terrible forebodings of the immediate future, forebodings of catastrophe and doom.

I should like to, look at history in two ways: both in terms of man's unaided natural knowledge of his own past, and also in the light of Jewish and Christian revelation. I should like to discover if from what the philosopher and the theologian can see, one can make a just judgment of the promise that one may look for in the future and entertain thereby a truly sober optimism.

The crucial word in the philosophy of history is not the past, nor the present, but the future. In fact, the trouble with most views of history, is that they have been primarily concerned with the past or even with the present, whereas the philosophy of history is primarily concerned with the future. Man is the only historical animal; so far as I know the facts, he is the only living creature on the planet which has a continuous history. Only man has anything like a cultural development, so that only man can talk about his past, his present and his future. But the striking fact is that even though only man has a history, only very recently, at the most in the last two hundred years, has man developed the beginnings of an historical sense. By an historical sense, I mean a sense of the future. Obviously there were Greek and Roman historians, Thucydides and Herodotus, Livy and Tacitus, but history for them was entirely an account of the past for guidance in the present, not for prophesying the future. It is quite a recent and novel insight to look at history as an indicator for the future. Previous ages, particularly the Middle Ages, were singularly unhistorical. They had no sense of the future and very little sense of the past. Almost all medieval writing was political or philosophical, proceeding as if history would move up until the present and then end, as if the present were to continue as a sort of eternal status quo. But one who has an historical sense, a sense of the future, understands the present as a moving point, not as a state indefinitely prolonged.

The understanding of the present as a moving point is a function of two things, it seems to me. It is a function of our historical imagination which in turn is a function of the amount of actual past his-

tory known; and it is a function of the degree to which with intelligence and insight we penetrate into the motion of that history to understand its controlling principles.

I like to think of the first factor, the understanding of the past in terms of the amount of past history known, in terms of a law of historical optics. The angle of reflection is equal to the angle of incidence. I should like to have you use that as an analogy to construct a picture of historical optics. The angle of preview is equal to the angle of retrospection. The degree to which we can see forward is somehow determined by the degree to which we can see backward over the course we have come. If this is true, few of us are entitled to be called more than fledgling prophets. In the case of the Western European world we have about twenty five hundred years of recorded history. What is that? What kind of elevation does that give anyone looking forward at the future of this earth?

That, I think, portrays one thing about my optimism. It is a very long range optimism. There is no reason to suppose that something good must happen in the next hundred or the next thousand years. One can be an optimist only in the longest, deepest terms, not in a short view of the past or the future.

I say it is not only the amount of past history known that determines one's understanding of the present as a moving point into the future, but also the degree to which we can penetrate into the motions of human history itself and those things controlling it. The philosophy of history is determined by the sheer amount of historical knowledge, on the one hand, and the degree of philosophical penetration on the other hand. The major problem in the philosophy of history, it seems to me, is the problem of taking the right, moderate position between the unrestrained prophets of progress and the equally unrestrained prophets of doom and decay. We are all familiar with the Spenglerian point of view, that every culture has a life cycle and is ultimately doomed to death and destruction. The two optimists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Hegel and Marx, stand in flat opposition to Spengler in their view of history as a simple, inevitable progress. The truth lies, it seems to me, somewhere between those two.

I would like to describe, if I can, the motion of history, both in terms of the simple facts of European history, taking it in itself, and in terms of the principles inductively arrived at through looking at those facts. But first I would like to make some preliminary points about the motion of history itself, for history is a motion,

and the motion of history must be distinguished from the motion of nature.

It is here, I think, that the Marxist makes his greatest error in not distinguishing between the dialectic of history and the dialectic of nature. Nature and history, nature and culture, do not support the same motion. Physical and biological science study all those motions which characteristically are repetitive. There would be no sciences of nature if the motions of nature were so progressive that they rejected the uniformity of repeated motions. In fact, the discussion of biological evolution or of cosmic evolution properly belongs not to the natural sciences but to history, for these are not natural motions in the sense in which the motions of a falling body are natural. But the motion of history is not natural motion. It is strictly not cyclical. History does not repeat itself. What is it that apparently repeats, but apparently moves on? It is the spiral. It comes around with an analogous part of the old motion but on a different plane. If you combine the circular motion with the straight motion upward, you will get the motion of the spiral. The motion of history is the spiral motion forward, partly repetitive and cyclical and also partly, but not completely, progressive. This difference arises because the motions of nature spring from the potentialities of matter whereas the motions of history spring primarily from the unique mental and spiritual potentialities of man.

My next point puts together a partial truth from Spengler with a partial truth from Hegel and Marx. The truth in Spengler is that a given culture is born, rises to maturity, declines, and finally dies. But human civilization, the whole of European culture, could go under and that would not be the end of culture. One of our errors is to suppose our culture, or anybody's particular culture, is human civilization. Actually, it may be that cultures do rise and fall, but behind that is the motion forward it is very slow of human civilization itself. And the truth that is somehow in Marx and Hegel is that there is an agony of progress, that there is no generation without the agony of corruption. When Hegel speaks of the dialectic of history, he is talking about a motion from one contrary to another to the reconciliation of both in a higher synthesis. But this is the characteristic motion of a mind learning. If there is such a motion in history, if there is anything like progression in history, then a mind must be at work.

Let me turn from these general remarks to a very simple statement of what evidences of progress are, what our historical past indicates about the present moment, and where that present moment seems to be moving. Let me divide my remarks into two parts pro-

gress in intellectual matters and progress in economic and political matters, and see if I can predict some motion into the future.

The nineteenth century, which was the first century with any great emphasis on progress, had too simple a view of what intellectual progress was. The nineteenth century European thought progress meant that the primitive and unworthy efforts of our ancestors were set aside while we mounted to higher levels of cultural attainment. I should like to present a sounder and fairer view of what has happened in European history, for genuine progress never cavalierly discards the past but always integrates the new with the old. I would say that there was a great and characteristic achievement of the Greek world philosophical knowledge. They were the first people in the Western World to be knowers of the truth of the nature of things. They proceeded to do that by the methods of philosophy and not by the methods of science. But in their philosophy of nature and philosophy of man was contained inchoately the germs of modern scientific knowledge. The great achievement of the Middle Ages and it took a thousand years to do it, and then it was only held for a moment at the end of the thirteenth century was to combine organically the truth of revealed religion with the truth in the natural knowledge of the Greeks. This organic synthesis of philosophy and theology was held for a moment. But, with the beginning of modern times, the unity achieved by understanding these two disciplines in their relations to each other was lost and that loss brought on all the intellectual confusions of our age. But modern times have a much greater work to do than the Greeks or the Middle Ages. It is our task to achieve the synthesis of the three fully developed elements in our intellectual culture: science, philosophy, and theology, just as in the early Middle Ages religion stole the stage and there was lack of harmony in the household of knowledge because philosophy and religion couldn't get along together, so now the newcomer science has taken the center of the stage. Just as it took a thousand years to achieve the perfect order of philosophy and religion, so it may take another thousand years to achieve the perfect order of the three science, philosophy and religion. But, one of the reasons why I am an optimist, is that I think this ordering must be worked out. Human history will not stop until all these potentialities implicit in culture are fully and explicitly realized.

But I have deeper reasons for my optimism than this rather jocular one. My real reasons lie in the history of economy and the history of political development. Certainly, on the most superficial level, everyone would have to admit that, in so far as we know the history of men all over the world, there has been one quite steady

economic progression and that is a progressive emancipation from need. We have gradually achieved more and more power in the conquest of the material world, so that if we were wise enough and just enough there would be few men suffering physically today, whereas a thousand or two thousand years ago even the justest men could not have prevented a great deal of physical suffering.

But there is an aspect which is even more optimistic. It is the change in the character of human slavery. Our slaves today are more fortunate, their slavery is less intense, it is less ignominious and degrading than in Phoenicia and Tyre two thousand years ago. To put it in technical terms, at one time, the slave was both a political and an economic slave. There really was no difference between the slave and the hand tool or the domestic animal. There is still less inhumanity in the German concentration camps than in the slavery of Phoenicia. There has been this gradual change in the servitude. Now our slaves are merely wage slaves. That is bad enough, but at least they have some control over that slavery. Dignity is not completely taken from them.

Let me tell you the story of political progress in a few words. It is a story which, curiously enough, will show you how for twenty eight hundred years the same fight has been fought over and over again with only a little advance each time, so that you can say that if the same fight is fought for another thousand years, then our progeny a thousand years hence may be standing on a little firmer ground. The story points to democracy, which is, I think, when properly defined, the ideal and perfect form of human government. But the history of the last twenty eight hundred years is not the story of a fight for democracy, it is the story of the fight for constitutional government. The fight started twenty eight hundred years ago. The first stand on the heights of Thermopylae was in part a battle for constitutional government. The Greeks were quite conscious of the fact that they were the first people to have constitutions, not to be ruled by great kings treating them as subjects and ruling as despots, albeit often benevolent ones. That was the battle fought at the pass of Thermopylae, on the plains of Marathon, the sea of Salamis. That is the battle fought today on the pass of Thermopylae, on the same plains and the same waters. In twenty eight hundred years there has been no motion from that issue except that each time there is some small gain for constitutional government, a gain always lost again. But, it is re-won more firmly and more fully and more surely. The Greeks won constitutional government and then lost it through their own imperialism. The Romans threw out their kings, set up a model constitutional government, and then lost it through imperialism. We watch a similar phenomenon in medieval

Europe. Again there is the achievement of constitutional forms, only to be lost in the waves of nationalism, imperialism, and the Divine Right of Kings. That same fight was fought in the nineteenth century. And you see it being lost today. It is quite possible that constitutionalism will be completely wiped out, that there will be a hundred or two hundred years in which there will be no constitutional government. But I feel certain, in the nature of things, that it will come back, and that when it comes back next time we will have a firmer grasp on realities and, that cycle having been completed, we will go on to democracy.

If I were to predict the future, I would say we will not get a firm hold on constitutional government anywhere in the world and we will not begin to achieve democracy until two obstacles among three are removed, the third being our failure to educate properly. The two other obstacles to be removed are a bad economic system and one of its consequences, namely nationalism and imperialism. Capitalism, as we know it, necessarily introduces oligarchical elements in the government and enslaves some of the people. The class conflicts which follow from economic injuries make a safe working of constitutional government impossible. The product of capitalism is the really immoral conduct of nations in the arena of international affairs. The one thing we can learn from the Peloponnesian war is that you cannot be a monarchy abroad and a republic at home. Immorality externally defeats morality at home. Until these present obstacles are removed, you will not get that next motion forward.

If you ask whether I think this will happen, I will say I am certain it will happen. I am as certain there will sometime in the future be a single community of people, a single government of all the peoples of the earth as I am sure that there will be another presidential election in the next three years. My certainty rests on a very simple reading of the motion of history from the matriarch and patriarch, to small tribes, to the city states, to the amorphous federations of the Greeks, and finally to the rise of the modern nation. This progression has not been accidental. The association of peoples depends chiefly on the barriers to communication. But distances are distinctly relative to our capacity to shorten them. Hence, we have a right to suppose that our progress in the control of communications will be such that the physical obstacles to communication will be removed and all the peoples of the world will be able to live together as if in a small community. It is up to us to see if the moral obstacles will be removed.

What is the philosophy of history involved in these facts? Very briefly, it is a rectified Marxism, a materialism which is more materialistic than Marx because it admits many more potentialities than the Marxists admit in the world. It admits potencies in mind and spirit as well as in matter. There are in history two kinds of causes, two kinds of matters, physical and spiritual. It is only through the operations of the mind upon the conflicts produced by matter that one transcends the matter and moves forward slightly in the spiral motion. Such a philosophy of history is woefully inadequate, and I know how very slight, indeed, my slightly founded principles are. But, I think this is the weakness of any philosophy of history. I do not think the philosopher or the scientist or the historian can find the basis for genuine knowledge of the motion of history.

I would like to propose a cure. I think the philosophy of history should be supplemented by a theology of history. Let me propose to you what a theologian would say about the facts we have been discussing. The main points of this statement are common to both Christianity and Judaism.


The interesting thing is that the theologians say human history has its origin in the fall of man, in sin. There would be no history of mankind, in any sense in which we know history, if man had continued to live in Eden. If that is true, then history is a kind of nostalgia, and human yearnings throughout history are not yearnings to go forward, but rather nostalgic yearnings for a paradise lost in the beginning of the career of the race. Theology is making the profound point that progress is a long, winding path back to perfection, though actually it doesn't terminate in paradise regained on earth, but only in heaven. The termination of history is the last judgment, which comes at the end of time. In between the origin of history in the fall and the terminus in the last judgment there is a government of history which is particularly complex.

The most important point I can make theologically and the theological truth is completely violated today is that the working out of history is at once the result of man's freedom and God's Providence. This is the profoundest mystery that the theologian faces. The operations of the human reason are at once the work of man's free will and also providentially ordered by God. Putting together Divine Providence and man's freedom is the most difficult thing the theologian does. It is precisely on this point that many grievous errors are being made today. On the one hand, there are those who resign themselves to entire predestination, a fatalistic unwinding of a plan, and in consequence withdraw completely from man's moral

duties in this world. On the other hand, there is overconfidence in man's own powers, as if he could produce all things as he wished.

I cannot understand the person who would believe in God and God's providence for human affairs, who would not be an optimist. A Jewish or Christian pessimist is unthinkable, it seems to me. Optimism is of the very core of these two religions. Their understanding of nature and God's Providence strikes the profoundest hope, not only for this world's salvation, for actual progress in human affairs, but for the limit of progress which occurs at the end of time itself.

Let me conclude with a brief comment on the significance of a philosophy of history, such as this, both theoretically and practically. I think all of us owe it to ourselves to speculate, to contemplate the facts of history and to speculate on them, even though none of us can achieve much certain truth about them. It seems to me that the very goodness, the very benefit of history is to emancipate oneself from time and from history itself, because the better understanding we have of history, the more we are emancipated from its localities and its blindnesses. Through the philosophy of history, if we can achieve it, we get a very weak participation in eternity.

So much for the theoretical value of the philosophy of history. But, practically, there is a bad and good side to this kind of interest in history. Practically, it should teach us to be optimistic, not for ourselves, not for our own times, but for mankind, or for the future of the race as a whole. If we have this kind of sober optimism, we might also have a right fortitude for handling the hardships which fortune may bring in our day. But, there is one fundamental qualification of an optimism which is based on the eternal perspective and that is that viewing things *sub specie aeternitatis* never should relieve us of a moral burden of acting our roles on the scene here and now. Take, for example, Anne Lindbergh's *Wave of the Future*. What she has done and what many other people like her do, is to act as if it were wise to watch where history was going, not with your participation, but as if you were standing on the side lines as a pure spectator and then jump on its back and ride with it. This is a complete surrender of human freedom and is thoroughly immoral. I think that the greatest truth one can state here is that in the realm of history there is no innocent bystander. To be a bystander in history is to be guilty of avoiding the responsibility of sharing in the world's work. 

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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

RE: Must We Hate Our Enemies?

Max,

As someone said in another context, hating is like taking poison in the hope it will kill the other person.

TCB

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